

Against the Grain

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International Focus

Column Editor: **Fred Lynden** (Brown University)



Impressions of Acquisitions in Russia: February 1992 by **Wendy Miller** (UCLA, School of Library Science)

This past February, I visited the Commonwealth of Independent States. It was my first trip in nine years to this land where I had lived from 1974-1982. Sentimentality notwithstanding, as a graduate student at UCLA's library school, my goal was to learn something about the changes in gifts and exchanges and collection development policies brought about by the Gorbachev era. Things are changing so quickly, however, that the last six years already have the quaint tint of "history." Thus, rather than attempting to define categorically or predict the impact of Russian political changes on the acquisitions process, either there or here, I would prefer to describe simple impressions garnered from interviews with librarians and administrative officials in Moscow and Volgograd.

Problems of distribution reflect the breakdown of the infrastructure. With the dismantling of the government, its distributors, the "kollektory," are becoming independent. This shift has left a gap in the domestic system of collection development. The kollektory were a primary channel for acquisitions, albeit a highly bureaucratic and imperfect one. What will take their places, or how they will establish their roles as independents, remains to be seen.

The economic crisis is as disastrous for libraries as it is for the average individual. While the U.S. media has focused on the difficulty of getting the basics, we many rest assured that the equivalent for libraries is equally complex. Starting from the high cost and scarcity of paper to the withdrawal of automatic state subsidies of publishing houses, the entire system of producing books and periodicals is unpredictable. Independent publishers take an

enormous risk just by starting an enterprise and their survival, already hinging on slim resources, is further endangered by the unsystematic and ineffective advertising and outreach to the potential market.

The common theme is money, especially hard currency. The Russians understand that their problems with distribution and production, so exacerbated by all the changes of the last few months, are their responsibility to solve. They realize that they will have to create and deliver their products by the rules of the world economy, and yet, while the pendulum still swings, promises are hard to keep and it seems that a new shortage is discovered every day.

What appears to have changed little is getting things accomplished through interpersonal contacts. We Westerners do far less of our business this way (in any case, we admit to it less). At the very least, "connections" here have usually *supplemented* rather than *supplanted* an organizational framework through which to get things done. In con-

trast, the Russian black market, so dependent on trust your partners, had no official framework. This is easy to see now that the black market (and all that went with it), known in its official capacity as the free market, is the primary *modus operandi* of the current frenzied economic situation, which Gorbachev referred to on March 23, 1992 as "living in an insane asylum."

These thoughts are mainly impressionistic reflections. Although I am still only a student, I can imagine the hardship these days of doing business with the CIS. Until a new stable structure emerges, it would seem that the best response to the chaos, if possible, is to keep personal channels open. It is a dynamic of business that Russians with the free market spirit have longest understood. At the same time, I have no doubt that they are trying to create a market and system of distribution that more closely parallels ours. In the long run, they are striving to approximate the world market. In the short run, we may have to tolerate the lunatic climate and meet them halfway. ☼

Call for Abstracts

The 1992 Charleston Conference **November 5-7, 1992 Charleston, SC**

We are interested in abstracts in all areas of acquisitions, collection development, and scholarly publishing. We are especially interested in innovations, trends, and state-of-the-art.

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